

Chapter 10



Downtown Norwalk

Goals:

(Taken from economic development goals; used here as applicable to downtown development)

1. Build upon the successful work of existing City and County level economic and business development organizations and coordinate planning with any new such entities, and support their planning and programming to address long-term needs and provide a sound, solid base for economic and business development that emphasizes and utilizes our strengths.
2. Promote an environment to nurture, retain, and expand current businesses and the central business district.
3. Ensure that adequate information and resources are available to promote a prospective or expanding business's understanding of City incentives, assistance, review and approval processes, and other requirements for development.
4. Provide a pro-development, cooperative atmosphere within the public sector that will accommodate and not hinder suitable and desired development.
5. Ensure that incentives are balanced and do not burden the taxpayer.
6. Approach job creation, retention, and enhancement efforts with a focus on the future, long-term health of the community, and on diversifying the employment and tax base.
7. Provide an environment that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship, through venture capital, guidance and counseling as needed, and referrals to other community services.
8. Develop a proactive tourist outreach program, with local customer service providers trained to welcome visitors.
9. Focus on developing businesses and services that capture local and external revenues, such as full-service restaurants, with hours, products, and services that meet the needs of the local market.

Introduction

The central business district or Downtown, referred to as the Uptown district during its revitalization in the 1990's, is the governmental and service center for the City and, in many respects, for Huron County. It also maintains an important role as a retail center. A major revitalization project in the 1990's provided a new streetscape for a district extending along Main Street from Case Street at the western end to Foster Street to the east. Streetscape improvements were accompanied by investments in building facades, and the central business district has maintained an attractive and appealing appearance to the present.

Several themes were brought out during the community forums, and in a focus group of central business district stakeholders. Among the more obvious concerns, such as “filling the empty buildings” and “cleaning up storefronts”, were these:

- Find a niche for downtown growth
- First stop for County residents for economic, cultural, and professional activities
- Make Norwalk a destination City; make Downtown a vital destination within the City, with dining and retail uses
- Expand the “Market Days” concept
- More variety and specialization of stores
- Retail businesses most likely to succeed will be specialty stores
- Attract a major retailer to grow the entire retail community
- Attract tourists to stop; bed and breakfast in Uptown
- Provide an incubator and entrepreneur training
- Theme for Downtown: Victorian
- Apartments above storefronts
- Make use of specific attractive buildings with potential: prime example is the old jail
- Downtown should be location for any teen center, with live entertainment and music
- Create a more lively Main Street
- Note: There was no consensus on the existence of a “parking problem”, but many felt that thought should be given to better directional and wayfinding signage

The vision for Main Street that emerges from the several means of community input is that of a mixed-use central business district, retaining its importance as the County seat and a center for government (County and City) and for personal and business service offices, building a mix of specialized retail businesses that attract knowledgeable and curious shoppers, housing, and office-oriented businesses (such as the headquarters of the International Hot Rod Association). Potential also exists to offer attractive dining and entertainment options, and even to provide housing where building space in upper stories lends itself to conversion to apartments and lofts.

The downtown district, which received streetscape improvement assistance and thus is visually identifiable as a continuous district, extends from Seminary Street along Benedict Ave. to the south, along Whittlesey Avenue to Railroad Street to the north, and from Case Street to Foster Street along Main Street. As a collective location for businesses, including nearby strip retail along Whittlesey, the greater central business district can be defined as extending from Case as far east as Milan/Woodlawn, south across the railroad tracks to the Norwood/ Benedict intersection, and north to League Street, incorporating the new Tops plaza and Uptown Shopping Center.

Central Business Districts are, in many respects, the heart of a City. They contain some of its oldest structures and, more than any other area in the community, provide a link to the City’s heritage and past. They also have several assets that provide a competitive advantage as a location for activity. First, they enjoy a centralized location, and are easily accessible from all points in the community. Norwalk’s downtown, like many, is built around the “zero intersection” of U.S Route 250 (Whittlesey/Benedict) and State Route 61 (East/West

Main). Those highways (especially U.S. 250, which provides access from central and eastern Ohio to the Lake Erie vacation area) bring considerable outside traffic into the downtown.

Second, as noted just above, downtowns contain a unique mix of architectural assets. Norwalk is no exception, with such diverse buildings as the County courthouse and former County jail buildings, the Gardner-Hipp (National City Bank) building, the Towne and Country Theater, a mix of churches bracketed by St. Paul's Roman Catholic church to the east and St. Paul's Episcopalian Church to the west, and several blocks of diverse commercial structures.

Pictorial Summary of Architectural Assets in the Downtown:
Public Buildings and Space



Governmental Centers: Left: County Office Building (former Citizen's Bank building). Center: Huron County Courthouse. Right: Norwalk City Hall.



Public Space Downtown: Left: Pohl Park, a pocket park adjacent Gardiner-Hipp Building. Right: Scene from Bresson Park, adjacent to Berry's Restaurant.



Civic Uses Downtown: Left: Norwalk Public Library, a Carnegie building. Right: Norwalk's U.S. Post Office

Pictorial Summary of Architectural Assets in the Downtown:
Buildings Housing Private Business



Gathering places: Left: Sheri's Coffee House.

Right: Berry's Restaurant



Traffic generators: Left: Chamber of Commerce building houses Chamber of Commerce, Norwalk Area United Fund, Norwalk Economic Development Corporation, Main Street Norwalk, and Norwalk Community Development Corporation. Right: the Diamond Collection building at the corner of Main and Whittlesey, a mixed-use building with retail, office, and restaurant uses.



Left: example of commercial property in Downtown, with upper stories presenting development potential. Right: Focal point for Downtown entertainment, the Norwalk Towne and Country Theater.

A third asset is the support and action of a number of local stakeholders. Unlike malls, “big boxes”, or franchise stores, most of Norwalk’s downtown is owned and managed by people who live in and have a stake in the well-being of the City of Norwalk. This confluence of the “enlightened self-interest” of numerous stakeholders results in a dynamic and creative core that can jointly oversee and plan for the future of the downtown area.

The presence of this third asset resulted in the formation of Main Street Norwalk, an organization co-located in the Chamber of Commerce building, with a Board of Directors and hired Manager. As its name implies, Main Street Norwalk follows the national Main Street model for downtown revitalization. The four-point Main Street approach, which focuses on the primary importance of organization, design, promotion, and economic restructuring, is described on page 8.

The Main Street Norwalk organization has developed a vision for Norwalk’s downtown district, and each component of that vision includes one or more goals. Those goals have been incorporated into the recommendations that are included later in this chapter. The following is a listing of the vision and goals developed by the Organization Committee and Board of Main Street Norwalk:

Main Street Norwalk...

- **Is a focal point for civic and cultural activity.**
 - Create reasons to come to Main Street through retail activities, special events, and festivals
 - Cultivate people’s habit of coming to Main Street by using the district as the natural setting for social and civic life
- **Is a vibrant business district with a variety of specialty stores known for quality and excellent customer service.**
 - Provide education for existing businesses on customer service, basic business concepts.
 - Determine what businesses to recruit to the district (clusters) and make a plan to do so.
 - Promote the “uniqueness” of Main Street business – quality and service.
 - Promote the spirit of cooperation by establishing uniform hours.
 - Identify and prioritize customers; identify and meet their needs through enhanced service and business recruitment. Market segments: tourists (heritage); young customers (Sheri’s Coffee House, WIFIs, etc.); older customers (Saturday morning “routines”); nearby communities coming to Wal Mart, theaters, etc.); weekday 9-5 workers in the district.
- **Is safe, secure, well-maintained, and user friendly**
 - Develop plan for maintaining district’s green areas.
 - Enhance wayfinding (see next point).
- **Celebrates its unique history and character.**
 - Integrate Norwalk’s rich heritage into “wayfinding” (e.g. names of parking lots, street signs to parking).
 - Develop walking tours of the business district.
- **Maintains a thriving residential community.**
 - Support residential development of upper floors.
- **Reflects the hometown values of the Norwalk community.**
 - Adopt “Main Street Norwalk...Welcome Home” as district’s tagline.

Trends in Downtown Revitalization

The National Main Street Center releases results of an annual survey of downtowns throughout the country. The most recently reported survey, in 2003, contained the following observations on national trends within commercial areas:

- Most “vital signs” pointed toward continuing progress in commercial districts: increased property values, ground floor occupancy, and increased upper-floor occupancy in 1/3 of the downtowns, increases in retail and restaurants in nearly half, increase in professional offices in more than one-third, increase in housing in nearly one-third, and more than half reporting more businesses with websites than in the last year.
- Thirty-eight percent reported an increase in mom-and-pop businesses, down from the past year, and a corollary increase in the number of districts reporting new franchises.
- One-fourth reported a decrease in crime, with only 8 percent reporting an increase.
- Almost three-fourths reported more people at special events (such as festivals) than in the last year – making five straight years of big increases.
- The Main Street Center noted that many specific community victories involved such items as developing key community properties, rehabilitating historic theaters, or keeping public buildings downtown.
- Top challenges cited included making the transition from start up to long-term funding of Main Street programs (reported by 40 percent of respondents), managing a commercial district during lengthy construction of public improvements, finding new businesses to fill vacant storefronts (particularly independent businesses), and the issue of big-box discount stores that often “leapfrog” into larger spaces, abandoning their smaller stores to deteriorate as they sit vacant.
- On the positive side, more than one-third of survey respondents reported innovative industries in their districts, including such divergent products as game software, gourmet foods, and recorded language training programs.

In presenting the above survey results, National Main Street Center director Kennedy Smith presented seven keys to guiding downtown districts through the next decade. These keys have relevance for the City of Norwalk, and indeed some of them support and underscore the goals and recommendations that appear elsewhere in this chapter.



Scene in Bresson Park in Norwalk's central business district

The Main Street Approach to Downtown Revitalization

Many communities, including Norwalk, have adopted the Main Street approach as developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This approach underscores the value of planning comprehensively, and pursuing four major points of revitalization simultaneously:

1. **Organization**, or getting everyone working toward the same goal, with consensus on objectives and cooperation among stakeholders. A voluntary board oversees Downtown activities in Norwalk.
2. **Promotion** involves “selling the image and promise of Main Street to all prospects.” It is important to market the unique and positive characteristics of the downtown district to a number of targets, including shoppers, investors, new businesses, and visitors. The goal of promotion is to forge a positive image through advertising, promotional activity, special events, and marketing campaigns carried out mainly by local volunteers.
3. **Design** involves getting the Downtown into “top physical shape” by capitalizing on its best physical assets, such as historic buildings, traditional downtown layouts, and memorable public spaces.
4. **Economic Restructuring** means “finding a new purpose for Main Street’s enterprises.” This approach encompasses assistance to help existing businesses expand and recruiting new businesses. One goal is to convert unused or underused space into productive property to sharpen the competitiveness of business enterprises.

The Main Street Center of the National Trust lists several important principles or characteristics of the Main Street approach which follow.

1. **Comprehensive:** No single focus will improve the downtown. Revitalization is a complex, multi-faceted issue.
2. **Incremental:** Small, incremental steps and successes will pace the program. Simple activities will lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the process, and help people develop skills to tackle more complex problems and ambitious projects over time.
3. **Self-help:** Local leaders must have the will and desire to mobilize local resources. Mobilization of local time and money from stakeholders will be the key to success.
4. **Partnerships:** All stakeholders in the public and private sectors contribute time, money, and expertise.
5. **Assets:** Main Street must capitalize on the unique assets it already has, such as distinctive buildings, neighborly shop owners, and “a human scale that can’t be copied elsewhere.”
6. **Quality:** A high standard of quality should be set for every aspect of the commercial district.
7. **Change:** Over time, skeptics will become believers; at first, almost no one believes Main Street can turn around. Changes in attitude and practice are slow but definite, and essential. Over time, the sum of the small, incremental changes will be noticeable, and even significant.
8. **Implementation:** It is not important to wait until a plan can be followed precisely “by the numbers.” “Main Street’s focus is to simultaneously plan for the future while creating visible change and activity now.”

Seven Keys to Success (source: June/July 2004 “Main Street News”, National Trust)

1. Strengthen planning and land use laws so that “urban” is really urban and “rural” is really rural, and the sprawl between the two is controlled better (or is never built). Elements should include a downtown retail size cap ordinance, a Main Street-friendly comprehensive plan, and financial incentives for Main Street investment. “Smart growth” policies, while preserving land and encouraging efficiencies of compact growth, will also favor the maximum and best use, and the directing of growth to existing centers such as the downtown.
2. Create an environment that cultivates and supports innovative new businesses. This may include training, peer-to-peer mentoring, seed capital, financing, and the market research needed to help independent businesses get established and grow on Main Street.
3. Downtown districts should be “24/7”, with housing, which provides people keeping eyes and ears on what’s happening, and with neighborhood-serving retail businesses to meet basic consumer needs.
4. Think beyond retail. Less than 20 percent of the space in a fully occupied Main Street district is typically actually used for retail businesses. The remainder is employed for housing, offices, government, entertainment, religion, and, increasingly, small-scale industries. These activities give the downtown economic and market diversity, and a base of employees who can patronize community-serving retail businesses.
5. Entertainment needs to be a stronger component of Main Streets, whether it’s a theater, a spontaneous street performance, or a farmers market. People are starved for things to do besides watching television and going shopping.
6. Place greater emphasis on the environment. Each year, the U.S. buries about 33 million tons of wood-related construction and demolition debris in landfills, making up almost half of all the material in solid waste landfills. Alternatively, concentrate on “recycling” and reusing historic buildings.
7. Place greater emphasis on history. Much of America’s history was made on its Main Streets. Americans’ civil rights remain intact on its Main Streets, and not at shopping malls, where case law has concluded that malls are private enterprises and that free speech could be a risk to that enterprise.

An eighth key is recommended to complement the preceding list. While downtown should celebrate history and its primary role in the heritage of the community, proactive steps should be taken to make it a competitive activity center in the future. Currently, such steps may include positioning downtown Norwalk as an attractive location for business within an expanding regional center (with its regional importance jump-started by the “super center” expansion of the north side Wal-Mart, a growing number of grocery supermarkets clearly supporting a regional market, opening of an eight-screen cinema drawing from well beyond Norwalk’s boundaries, and expectations for forthcoming follow-on business from restaurants and retail attracted to this growing center).

Other proactive steps include the potential for creating a wireless, “wi-fi” district downtown, promoting the low cost of locating businesses in the central business district, marketing to Internet-based businesses who can operate there, marketing to other “new economy”, knowledge-based businesses where a more urban location is not important, and quality of life factors can be taken into consideration, and supporting businesses and activities that attract or retain the “creative class” in Norwalk.

Strategies and Recommendations

Recommendations presented in this chapter were developed by a Downtown Resource Panel, with input from a downtown-oriented focus group, and from ongoing communications with the Main Street Norwalk Manager and attendance at monthly meetings of the Main Street Norwalk Board.

Strategy 1: *Organizing for Downtown Revitalization*

1. Use the Main Street Norwalk (MSN) organization and its Board as the organizational hub for downtown development and revitalization planning. Other entities should maintain close contact with Main Street, in order to present a unified and coordinated effort to improve and maintain Downtown Norwalk. These entities include the Chamber, NEDC, the City administration, and the Business Recruitment and Retention committee of MSN.
2. The entities listed in the previous paragraph should develop a uniform protocol and plan for the recruitment of businesses for the central business district. This would be an ongoing process as specific retail or service voids are discovered or specific business needs are defined.
3. Develop ways to market downtown Norwalk as a single entity with multiple partners and destinations. It is anticipated that a uniform brand and logo for downtown will be developed by the time this plan is adopted. A tagline has been developed for the downtown district, and it should be used individually and collectively by downtown businesses: “*Main Street Norwalk...Welcome Home!*” Those elements, along with any uniform graphics, should be universally adopted across all actively participating organizations. Those planning advertisements for downtown businesses should be encouraged to adopt or include these branding elements. Further, businesses should be encouraged to work toward uniform hours and cross-promotions.
4. Engage the City and County governments to participate in and be aware of downtown revitalization efforts, as both are major stakeholders – as property owners and employers – in the downtown.
5. Create, by 2008, a Community Resource Center and welcoming committee. Provide uniform information to building and business owners on available incentives and also on regulatory requirements. Put in place a *welcoming committee* for new businesses, and with follow-through to make sure any issues are resolved as soon as they are identified.

Strategy 2: Retain Existing Businesses Within the Central Business District

As with industrial development, it is important to work hard to retain the existing business and service mix. All partnering organizations, including the City, should consistently work to improve the systems and attractive features of the central business district, and to maintain current information on existing businesses and buildings.

1. Maintain and update a database of available space for businesses in the downtown area. Include pertinent data on cost and rent, ownership, available amenities, space and dimensions, and other critical factors. This database would be housed with NEDC, and shared with others (Main Street Norwalk, Chamber, Huron County Development Council), and is an ongoing project requiring constant updating. This information is important for existing businesses to be able to make informed decisions about expansion within the district, and also for the recruitment of prospective businesses.
2. Focus on key properties that have considerable development potential. Also, explore architectural enhancements that would broaden the usefulness of these key downtown properties. For example, one elevator could potentially provide access to upper stories in multiple adjacent buildings with some modifications. The elevator concept should be studied in detail for possible implementation by 2011.
3. Assist in implementation of projects that would create housing in upper stories of appropriate properties in the Downtown. Seek financial assistance for such projects to make them viable uses of space for the property owners and developers. Assistance and guidance could come from MSN, WSOS Community Action, banks and lenders, the Ohio Department of Development, and owners and developers. Housing options should be explored over the following five to ten years (to 2017).
4. By 2011, conduct a professional study of present and future parking needs, current capacity, and demand, and with recommendations for new or revised parking facilities and guidelines (time limits, fees, enforcement procedures, need for new spaces or lots, conversion of old lots, locations, and wayfinding signage). Main Street Norwalk should coordinate this study with the City administration. (Note: This plan includes some recommendations regarding parking later in this chapter).
5. Informational kiosks should be created in the downtown area. Organizations should be able to freely post information concerning upcoming events, services, and new or existing businesses. Lead agencies include MSN, Chamber, and organizations sponsoring or hosting events, with the kiosks in place by 2008.
6. Consider the creation of a Community Reinvestment Area or CRA (see Economic Development chapter for a description) that provides real property tax incentives for building improvements within a specified target area that includes housing. One recommended area is the downtown district, including adjacent residential areas that have evidence of some housing deterioration. This downtown district would be part of an overall effort to develop a series of CRAs strategically located throughout Norwalk, in

place by 2009, with assistance from the City administration, including the Law Director, Planning Commission, Main Street Norwalk, NEDC, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Strategy 3: *Communication and provision of information on resources, incentives, and review and approval processes for prospective and expanding businesses.*

Coordinated and consistent information for business and building owners is of vital importance for a successful revitalization effort. Owners need to know what tools may be available to assist them with their growth plans. They also need to understand the steps involved in any review or approval process. Those processes need to be as business-friendly as possible, while still serving their public function of ensuring the health, safety, and well being of Norwalk's citizens. Those involved with downtown revitalization should research existing incentives, and work with local resource providers including banks and lenders to develop new ones, and restructure processes and review entities to maximize their benefit to the central business district.

1. Build on the existing downtown façade improvement fund that is linked to Norwalk's revolving loan fund, and include pooled funds from lending institutions and other sources when they are identified. Such funds may be more discretionary, with more latitude in permitted uses, than the current funds derived from the federal Community Development Block Grant program. Funding goals and permitted uses can thus be expanded to respond to known local needs and goals. This expanded, pooled fund should be in place and ready to lend over the next five to seven years, and will involve several entities: MSN, banks and lenders, the City administration, NEDC, and the MSN Business Retention and Recruitment Committee.
2. Review the purpose, policies, and procedures of the existing Architectural Review Board (ARB). Maintain its required review function concerning federal incentive funding, but review its procedures to emphasize its role as a technical assistance provider with regard to the value of historic architecture, the desire for planned uniformity of appearance to market downtown as a single entity, and the preservation of historical architecture as a major downtown district asset. Ensure that the Board of Review and any Board of Appeals are in accord with the emerging vision for downtown Norwalk. This will involve the ARB foremost, but also the Mayor and Planning Commission, Law Director, Planning and Zoning Board, MSN, and the Chamber. Policies should be amended and the ARB restructured as needed.
3. Provide education for existing businesses and their employees on customer service and basic business concepts. Coordinate and offer this through MSN and the Chamber, using a downtown venue for training. This should be an ongoing effort.

Strategy 4: *Facilitation of job creation and retention in the central business district*

The central business district should be viewed as a mixed-use district generating significant employment and income. The downtown employer base includes City and County government, retail and distribution, restaurant and entertainment, and a variety of business

and personal service establishments including insurance, real estate, legal services, medical services, title agencies, surveying, architectural, and engineering, as well as other entities.

Downtown revitalization entities should work with employers, social service agencies, business organizations, and education providers to ensure that the local labor force meets the needs of the downtown as a significant source for employment, and that it can continue to be an attractive source of new employment.

1. Work with the Job Store, EHOVE Career Center, and BGSU Firelands, as well as other entities as they are identified, to teach prospective employees how to maintain gainful employment and how to appear and present themselves. Many of the jobs located within the downtown district involve close and repeated contact with the public, so interpersonal skills are of high importance in conducting business and retaining clients for one's employer and the downtown as a destination. Hospitality industry training should be considered for a number of downtown businesses and throughout Norwalk to consider as a joint and comprehensive program. In cases where an individual is not employed, an explanation of why that person is not hired may be a helpful suggestion for finding future employment. This effort should be ongoing, involving the County Department of Job and Family Services, employment agencies, employers in the downtown district, education providers, and local schools. This can be coordinated and combined (by MSN and Chamber) with the customer service training recommended under Strategy 3.
2. Build a coalition between business, education (EHOVE, DECA, Firelands BGSU campus), and social service providers. Work with high schools to plug students into the community as quality workers. Work with the Abigail House, Abby House, and Miriam House to find employment and support for their residents. Consider establishing a "learning zone" for adults to continuously improve their skills, particularly (for purposes of downtown development) in interpersonal relations and retail business operations. This coalition should develop a plan of action by 2012, and involved entities include United Fund, MSN, the City administration, Chamber, NEDC, educational institutions and school systems, and social service agencies such as the Salvation Army and Erie Huron CAC. The plan should be carried out as a long-range activity.

Strategy 5: *Development of tourism and hospitality-based businesses*

One component of the customer base and market for the downtown, while not the primary one, is the tourist and transitory base generated by the growing Lake Erie destination to the immediate north. While a longer-term goal may be for Norwalk to also become a destination for tourists, the City and County need to step up their efforts to attract a larger segment of the travel and tourism market that surrounds them. This can be accomplished through a focused effort to brand and unify the image of the community and the downtown, followed by increased outreach and service to the burgeoning tourism market.

1. Develop a list of methods to capture a portion of the tourist market attracted to Cedar Point, water parks, and other destinations to the north. A linked goal is to further capture the draw from Norwalk Raceway Park as the City's major attraction. This list

can be developed within one year of this plan’s adoption, with participation from Main Street Norwalk, the Chamber, NEDC, and the City administration, as well as key businesses.

2. Explore the feasibility of the use of a County or City “bed tax” to fund tourism and hospitality-related development in Norwalk. This source is largely a user fee, in that it is borne by customers of local hotels, bed and breakfasts, and other lodging establishments, and not by the residents or businesses within the taxing area. Stepped-up work plans in this arena should be undertaken first by existing entities, which in Norwalk would primarily be the Chamber of Commerce and Main Street Norwalk. Current consensus does not call for the creation of a new entity to address convention and tourism activity and planning. The development of a bed tax should be reviewed by a “blue ribbon committee” which includes representatives of the lodging industry, and if a determination is made to proceed, the bed tax should be implemented by 2010.
3. Develop a uniform brand for the downtown district based on local research. Develop a uniform logo, slogan, and/or other means by which to launch uniform, coordinated promotions involving multiple businesses and entities. Turnpike and other transient traffic should be captured with brochures in rest stops and hotels. Local businesses should be informed of the potential benefits of uniform regional advertising and publicity. Involved entities include MSN, the Chamber, possibly a marketing consultant, and other local stakeholders. A promotional strategy should be in place by 2008.
4. MSN, schools, performing groups, the Firelands Art League, the Chamber, and other entities should collaborate to increase the coordinated involvement of performing and arts organizations and entities in the downtown district, on an ongoing basis.
5. Consider new opportunities for festivals and events throughout the year where the emphasized primary “market” is Norwalk community members. Combine existing activities to create a “critical mass” of activities and raise local interest. This should be an ongoing activity involving MSN and the Chamber and its members, as well as the City administration.
6. Expand the “market days” concept with more visibility, signage, publicity, and participation. This is an expansion of the concept of the farmers market to include other vendors. This ongoing activity should be coordinated by MSN.
7. Improve awareness of the central business district through “gateway” information and identification, new signage providing direction to parking and downtown attractors, a tie-in to the Rails-to-Trails bicycle path, and more links to other attractions such as Norwalk Raceway Park, Eagle Creek and Sycamore Hills golf courses, and tourism traffic generators to the north. Signage should be in place by 2009, with participation from the Chamber, MSN, and City administration.



8. Boost the downtown district's visibility as "Norwalk's meeting place", for formal meetings, informal get-togethers for coffee or food, activity centers, restaurants, meeting venues, and entertainment. A number of venues exist to host meetings and events, including restaurants and a coffee shop, Towne and Country Theater, the Main Street School and St. Paul's Convocation Center, City and County facilities, and other potential facilities. This perspective should be promoted by the Chamber, MSN, individual participating businesses, and NEDC, with the concept marketed over the long term.

Strategy 6: *Develop new businesses and services in the downtown district*

There is a need to define the desired market for the central business district as well as identifying and recruiting businesses that would ideally serve that market. This falls under the purview of the "economic restructuring" portion of the four-point Main Street approach. Establishing a direction for the downtown's economic growth is central to the revitalization process, with growth measured in terms of the economic value of commercial activity and real estate. The overall goal is thus to establish a comprehensive strategy to bring about positive change by attracting investment downtown.

To strengthen the downtown district's existing economic base and then expand it, the National Main Street Center suggests the following typical economic restructuring activities:

- Stabilizing and improving the value of downtown real estate
- Studying local market conditions, identifying areas of opportunity, and designing strategies to build on those opportunities
- Helping existing businesses find better ways to meet their customers' needs and expand to meet market opportunities
- Recruiting new businesses to complement the downtown's retail and service mix and boost the downtown's overall market effectiveness
- Finding new or better uses for underused or vacant downtown buildings
- Developing appropriate incentive programs to stimulate commercial and real estate development
- Repositioning the downtown in the marketplace and effectively promoting it
- Developing long-term economic development strategies for the downtown's continued evolution

The Main Street Center recommends a number of actions and approaches to develop downtown real estate and catalyze downtown commerce. To enhance real estate: make small but visible improvements early in the revitalization to boost public interest; create financial incentives to stimulate building improvements; balance property improvements with commercial activity (to ensure that rents do not outpace sales and thus affordability); develop a good working relationship between public and private partners – including property owners, renters, real estate agents, lenders, local government officials, and the general public; and develop an inventory of downtown buildings. To boost downtown commerce, involve the following components: the quality of retail and service activity; marketing and promoting downtown business; maintaining existing businesses; recruiting new businesses to meet market opportunities; and reporting on marketing trends and channeling information to downtown business.

1. Support MSN in surveying local consumer demand. Identify the primary market area, and define a desired market area that captures the potential created by the Erie County tourism business and the market attracted by Norwalk's regional traffic generators (County government functions, a multi-screen movie theater, big box stores, and Norwalk Raceway Park, which demonstrates a potential to bring a sizeable regional market to the Norwalk area for major events). Identify desired product and service lines not currently available in town, with sufficient demand to generate profitable business. Find local businesses that can offer these missing lines, or recruit new businesses to provide them. Input from MSN, Chamber, NEDC, businesses. A survey should be conducted by 2009.
2. Support the creation and growth of a business incubator. This facility can offer space for emerging businesses, and short-term cost savings through shared support staff, equipment, and other operating costs, as well as access to business counseling and financing incentives. A business incubator may be located within or outside the downtown area, and can house retail, service, small manufacturing, and/or other business sectors. Success would be measured through the spin-off of a large number of the "incubated" businesses to their own locations, including other downtown sites for appropriate businesses. Continued feasibility, design, organizational, and financial analysis is needed for an incubator to move forward. An incubator facility should be under development within five to ten years if deemed viable and if a business plan can be adopted. Involved entities would include HCDC, NEDC, SCORE, SBDC, the City and possibly County administrations, the Chamber, and a task force addressing this issue.
3. Support efforts of MSN to expand on Norwalk's role as the County seat and center for services. Take advantage of the markets created by this role and the existence of significant County services and employees located in the central business district.
4. Promote the gradual development of a downtown "entertainment district", with restaurants, after-hours locations, and entertainment venues. Publicize new opportunities. This will occur incrementally, with the fuller use of existing venues, and it may take until 2026 to realize a fully functioning critical mass of entertainment-related activities in the downtown. This activity should be overseen by MSN, the Chamber, and individual business owners and developers.
5. Explore a variety of niches or areas of specialization that could set Norwalk apart. Lines of business identified in community forums and focus groups included music stores, sports (including motor sports), entertainment venues, outdoor activities, a banquet hall, clothing, general merchandise, antiques, military surplus, kitchen outlet, an upscale deli, resale shops, and specialty shops. Certainly, these are suggestions offered by a small number of people, but some of them may represent a few of the potential business lines that could potentially succeed in a growing Norwalk central business district. Continued and ongoing research into potential market potential should be provided by MSN, the Chamber, NEDC, and the Business Retention and Recruitment Committee of MSN.

6. Develop activities and destinations for youth and young adults. Research what interests and engages the City’s youth in large numbers by considering a consumer survey. Research what an ideal “teen center” would look like and how a business model for a teen center could be successful from the aspects of financial solvency and security. Determine whether to follow a for-profit or nonprofit model, and consider alternative locations, including existing businesses. Potential partners include MSN, school systems, churches, service organizations, the City administration, and teen task forces. A center or destination should be in place by 2011. See the Quality of Life chapter for more detailed information on this topic.
7. Work toward the development of a lodging facility (small hotel, or bed and breakfast) within the central business district, with an historical theme. Involve the Chamber, NEDC, MSN, and City administration. In business by 2026.
8. Explore the development and publicity of wireless Internet access throughout the downtown district over the next twenty years, using current or emerging technologies and platforms. Recruit businesses that can take advantage of this feature. Within the new Downtown Wireless District, make the expanded library a showcase of the innovative use of wireless technology with public access. Partners in development include MSN, an IT consultant (preferably a local vendor), City administration and Council, Chamber of Commerce, and an IT task force.
9. Support MSN plans for more outside activities and facilities to generate visible activity. This includes more comprehensive and creative use of public spaces, including Pohl and Bresson Parks, as well as sidewalks and private properties of participating businesses. Involve MSN and its Design and Promotion committees, and the Chamber. Research creative use of outdoor space in other communities.

Strategy 7: *Improvement to the physical attributes of the downtown district to enhance business and the usefulness and attractiveness of the downtown to business.*

Previous recommendations have largely addressed three of the four main points of the Main Street approach: organization, promotion, and economic restructuring. Equally important is the fourth element, design, and the physical improvements and enhanced attractiveness to the central business district that result from design improvements. The following recommendations involve planned and harmonious physical improvements to the public (streetscape, parks, roads and sidewalks, landscaping, signage, parking) and private (building facades, landscaping, and parking on private property) physical attributes of the downtown district and its environs.

1. Make optimal use and maximize the visibility and attractiveness of the downtown’s historically significant properties. For example, find a new use for the former Huron County Jail property (right), possibly as a restaurant, bed and breakfast, or shop. Promote a Victorian theme overall. Extend the boulevard feel and historic feel that extends inward from the



older homes along East and West Main Street. Include significant historical properties in future historic tours, such as the popular tour of West Main Street homes. Partners in these ongoing activities include County officials, the Firelands Historical Society, Firelands Museum located downtown, Architectural Review Board, MSN, and the City administration. Find a use and new owner or tenant for the old jail property by 2012.

- 2. Maintain the streetscape and its feeling of uniformity and identity within the district. Consider extending the district east to the Milan/Woodlawn intersection with East Main Street. Consider other extensions as well, perhaps tying in retail areas to the north along Whittlesey as far north as League Street. Involve MSN, the City administration, and affected property owners to gauge their interest (including potential participation in an assessment district).



Examples (nearly mirror images) of the unifying streetscape treatments (landscaping, lighting, pavers, banners)

- 3. Develop gateway signage to indicate the bounds of the Downtown District. Consider gateway locations at (south) Norwalk Creek bridge on Benedict; (north) vicinity of Whittlesey/League intersection; (west) vicinity of Main/Case intersection (west of Industrial Savings), and (east) just east of Milan/Woodlawn/Main intersection. Put in place by 2010; involve MSN, Chamber, and City.



Looking north from US 250 at edge of Downtown district.

- 4. Consider specific zoning and land use regulations for the downtown, and separate zoning classifications. Include consideration of a “Downtown Overlay District” where more mixed uses are allowed, such as commercial/service, residential, and light manufacturing. Ensure consistency in the application and enforcement of such a code. Make sure any new regulations seek to eliminate “clutter”, enhance the uniformity of the district and its preservation of historic architecture, and create standards of appropriateness that can be communicated easily to affected property owners. This will involve the City administration, zoning and planning officials and boards, and MSN and its committees and membership, and may benefit from input from consultants such as Downtown Ohio Inc.
- 5. Pursue greenscaping and uniform streetscaping of Whittlesey Avenue from City Hall north to League Street (through 2009), involving the City, property owners, MSN, and

service organizations. This segment of Whittlesey could be enhanced to provide drivers with a memorable point of entry to the downtown district, providing enough visual information, including wayfinding signage for points of interest, to generate increased interest by through traffic. Develop a plan for maintaining the district's green areas and plantings to consistently project an image of quality and care of maintenance.

6. Divert truck traffic from the central business district by developing alternate routes. Involve the City administration and Council, Planning Commission, affected businesses, County Engineer, ODOT, and an engineering consultant. See the Transportation chapter for additional information on this recommendation.
7. Ensure that utilities are sufficient for the downtown area, including water and sewer lines and the information infrastructure of telephone lines and cell phone reception. This ongoing activity involves the City, Chamber, MSN, and engineering consultants as needed.
8. Promote the development of key side streets as Main Street property vacancies decrease and the expansion of business opportunities on Seminary and Monroe Streets, where off-street parking is more readily available, as well as connecting side streets linking Seminary, Main, and Monroe. Include side street properties in any downtown overlay zoning change, to allow for flexibility and creativity in the use of such property. Involve property owners, MSN, and the Chamber, with a substantial improvement on these streets by 2014.
9. In line with the emphasis on side streets, encourage attractive rear and side entrances to Main Street and Benedict/Whittlesey businesses, with direct access to available off street parking. Encourage landscaping and beautification of rear facades where they are visible. Promote the combining of parking areas for adjacent properties to maximize available parking and provide for larger scale of design. Involve property owners, MSN, the Chamber, and the City administration, which may be able to provide incentive funding along with other pooled funding. Substantial improvement should be noted by 2012.
10. Inventory available parking and its availability and time limits. Improve directional signage to available lots, and other "wayfinding" signage as deemed necessary and helpful. Downtown wayfinding and related signage should be uniform in appearance, may include an adopted logo or tagline, and should reflect the City's heritage and historical significance, an acknowledged major asset. Enhance the attractiveness of parking lots and their function within the downtown area. Involve the City administration and planning and zoning personnel and boards, MSN, Chamber, property owners, business owners (who must encourage their employees to park in designated lots rather than on street). Implement any parking improvements by 2010.
11. Investigate the feasibility of providing public restrooms downtown. While it is doubtful that any public entity wishes to construct, maintain, and be responsible for the upkeep and security of such a facility, downtown property and business owners should be aware of existing restroom options for those in need of such a facility, such as restrooms located in the County Courthouse. Involve City and County officials.